# Rationality and Irrationality in Conflict

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Dr. Thomas P.M. Barnett, author of *The Pentagon's New Map,* visited Sandia in June 2005 to speak on his ideas about an evolving global security concept that he promotes as "a future worth creating." Dr. Barnett asserts that U.S. national security in the contemporary "globalized" world is best assured by bringing states of the "Non-Integrating Gap" of Africa, the Caribbean, the Middle East, the Balkans, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia into a "Functioning Core" (now consisting of the rest of the world including Europe, Asia, and North America) to increase connectedness. Quoting Dr. Barnett, "In this century, it is disconnectedness that defines danger. Disconnectedness allows bad actors to flourish by keeping entire societies detached from the global community and under their dictatorial control. Eradicating it is the defining security task of our age."
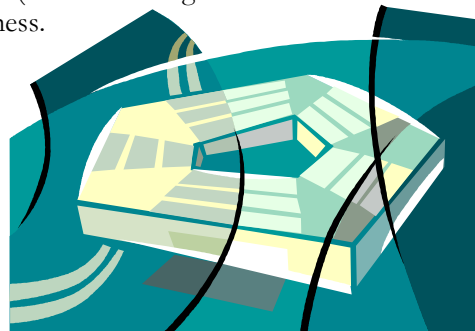
I've been thinking about how to analyze Barnett's ideas and put them into perspective. Simplifying and paraphrasing his presentation, one of the assertions that he made was that states in the "functioning core" would not have conflicts that escalated to war, so if we get the folks in the "gap" into the "functioning core" then we can prevent war. There are a couple of historical analogies that lead to a "theoretical" perspective that we can use to dissect this assertion.

> " **The communists asserted that…when the entire world was inevitably communist, there would be no more war. Other ideological or religious movements make similar claims….** "

The first analogy is to the communist movement. The communists asserted that there were only two kinds of war: legitimate wars of national liberation (*i.e.*, the advancement of communism) and illegitimate wars between capitalist states over their usual greedy self-interests. Therefore, when the entire world was inevitably communist there would be no more war. Other ideological or religious movements make similar claims: when the entire world is truly Christian or Muslim or democratic or self-aware or whatever, there will be no more war. Of course, there have been wars between communist states (China and North Vietnam), Christian states (take your pick), and democracies (Argentina and Great Britain; even Hitler was democratically installed). So I conclude that Barnett's strategy is actually more of an ideology.

This leads to the second analogy: the democratic (or Kantian) peace. This assertion is that liberal democracies do not fight wars with each other. ("Liberal" meaning individual rights, market economies, rule of law, etc.). That is, liberal democracies are economically interdependent, have much in common, and the people have more control over their elected leaders so that they can prevent their leaders from "irrationally" threatening their prosperity. There is a body of literature that claims (and disputes) that no democracies have gone to war based on statistical analyses of political science databases. Thus promotion of democracy was a central element of the Clinton foreign policy, and more recently, is the theme of the Bush "neo-cons." Barnett's strategy appears to be a variation of the democratic peace.

The theoretical base for these schemes is called "rational choice theory." Political scientists who are proponents of this theory believe that states act rationally, in general. Economically interdependent states would not go to war because war would threaten their prosperity, etc. So, one crucial question is whether states actually do act rationally. Several years ago I wrote a paper (with a student) entitled "Aggression, Rational Choice, and the Correlates of War" that tested rational choice theory. One of the strongest predictions of rational choice theory is that states will not start wars that they do not expect to win. They may

miscalculate, of course, but rational choice theory concludes in several published studies that states that initiate wars are overwhelmingly victorious. The "Correlates of War" is the "officially approved" database on war used by political scientists. This database encodes 32 variables from past wars (participants, populations, battle deaths, duration in "nation months," etc.) including *initiation* and *outcome*. With much difficulty Sandia was able to obtain a copy of the Correlates of War database. I had my student conduct a test analysis to become familiar with using the database. Because of the simplicity of the prediction we chose to test the correlation between initiation and outcome. That is, do states that start wars tend to win them?

   We were very surprised at what we found. If the data are presumed to be valid, then overall there is only a slight correlation between initiation and outcome, which suggests that going to war is, at best, a minimally rational act. Second, we found that different types of wars lead to different conclusions. The states that appeared to be rational in initiating war are minor powers against other minor powers and colonies and other non-states attacking minor powers. Two examples of anti-rationality where initiators tend to lose are major powers attacking major powers and colonies attacking major powers. This is especially troubling because the U.S. is a major power, and if we believe in the functioning core or the democratic peace, we may be surprised by other major powers that we expect to act rationally. Third, states seemed to act more rationally in the 19th century than in the 20th century. Again, this is troubling because the assumption is that modernization and globalization are key components defining the functioning core.

   These conclusions assume that the data in the Correlates of War are valid. We do not believe that they are. Creating a database of 32 variables cannot account for highly complex events such as international wars. For example, in the database, for WWII France is listed as both a winner and a loser (entering the war three times!) and Japan is neither an aggressor nor an initiator. (In fact, Japan is listed as the winner of the Sino-Japanese war, which ended on the same day that they attacked Pearl Harbor.) Germany in WWI and the Republic of Vietnam in the Vietnam War are not considered initiators (although the U.S. is listed as the initiator in the latter case). In the Yom Kippur War Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan are listed as initiators, while Iraq and Syria, which attacked before Jordan and Saudi Arabia, are not. Some wars have no initiators at all. The list of such issues is quite long.

   So what should we conclude? Peace in the functioning core depends on states acting rationally when it comes to war. Past attempts to determine whether states act rationally in initiating war are probably meaningless, so assertions of a democratic peace or a functioning core are ideological in nature. The evidence, while deeply flawed, would actually lead us to the conclusion that major powers (those we should fear, including nuclear powers) might act irrationally toward us even if they belong to the functioning core.

> " **On the other hand, if states do not behave rationally, we might be better off pursuing security through military strength to assure victory in any wars that irrational states may start.** "

   In addition, the "security dilemma" and the theory of arms races also depends on rational choice theory and lead to the conclusion that the U.S. should limit its power to appear less threatening and preserve peace with rational states. On the other hand, if states do not behave rationally, we might be better off pursuing security through military strength to assure victory in any wars that irrational states may start.

Finally, these comments are relevant to the work of Sandia's Advanced Concepts Group (ACG). From the ACG website, their basic premise is that it is problems of the human condition or of global resources that tend to lead the world into conflicts—either war or conflicts short of war. That is, the ACG's premise is that there are rational causes of conflict and addressing these causes will reduce conflict because others will act rationally. Others (besides Barnett) also share this view. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, founded in 1910, was so sure of their success in eliminating war that their charter includes provisions for the use of the rest of the endowment after peace is achieved. But, just as 32 variables cannot describe complex unique wars, we probably cannot perceive, predict, or control all the factors that may lead to war.

We do not know whether states act rationally. We do not know whether bringing states into the functioning core or whether addressing problems of the human condition or global resources will reduce conflict. We probably want to do these things anyway. But they might not work. And we should not rely on them as the fundamental source of national security. ■